



CNA Symposium Report: “Persistent Engagement in the Era of Minimal Footprint”¹

By Rebecca Edelston



On Tuesday, March 18, 2014, CNA convened a symposium of senior-level stakeholders from across the U.S. government (USG) interagency and academia to discuss “persistent engagement in the era of minimal footprint.” What follows is an overview of key themes, perspectives, and tensions that participants raised throughout the discussion.

Summary

In order to achieve effective persistent engagement, the United States needs to change the way it pursues its national security objectives around the globe. It needs to carefully consider *when* it engages and *how* it does so. Furthermore, in a resource- and access-constrained environment, persistent engagement requires thoughtful innovation. Symposium participants recognized that such a change will demand an emphasis on interagency collaboration, preventative measures, and building of trust with partners. Successful implementation of a strategy contingent on persistent engagement will also require renewed attention to regional and internal dynamics of both partners and adversaries, and greater efforts in building partnership capacity, especially through use of local solutions. Internally, it will necessitate a review of current U.S. government (USG) policies and procedures to ensure that they reinforce, not impede, persistent engagement. In turn, this review will require robust and transparent assessments of progress and internalizing of

¹ This document contains the best opinion of the authors at the time of issue. It does not necessarily represent the opinion of the Department of the Navy. Specific authority: N00014-11-D-0323. Cleared for public release. [Photo: U.S. Ambassador to Burundi Dawn Liberi escorts Burundian Minister of Defense MG Pontien Gaciyubwenge. On December 9, 2013, the U.S. government authorized U.S. aircraft to assist the Burundian National Defense Forces with their deployment to Bangui, Central African Republic. (U.S. Army Africa photo)]

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lessons learned. Finally, paramount to this endeavor will be the recognition that none of these efforts will be easy, and that they will take time to implement.

Why Persistent Engagement Matters

President Obama and Secretary of Defense Hagel have made it clear that the Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG) 2012 remains the guiding beacon of U.S. national security policy, even with tighter budgets and a decrease in Americans' approval of U.S. intervention abroad. In this resource- and access-constrained environment, the United States must maintain its global leadership, sustain existing commitments to partners, reassure allies, and deter its adversaries. Persistent engagement is one strategy that the United States can pursue if it wants to minimize the risks associated with shrinking budgets and declining political will, but it will need to make some fundamental changes and renew its focus in several areas in order to implement this strategy successfully.

As one participant explained, "Persistent engagement provides a means for the United States to demonstrate a sustained commitment to critical regions and states. By being both multifaceted and tenacious, it can facilitate an enduring web of contacts and interactions that not only connect the United States to other countries, but can also help build and sustain situational awareness, allowing U.S. decision-makers to remain sensitive to local and regional realities and dynamics. Persistent engagement facilitates targeted outreach that addresses and sustains the United States' diverse security relationships."

Conducting Persistent Engagement in a Resource-Constrained Environment

Prominent in the discussion on the future of persistent engagement were the looming budget cuts across the U.S. government. While many USG agencies are assuming that budget cuts will last only two to three years, several panelists suggested that they should plan for a much longer series of cuts.

As a result of these budget cuts, the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), rolled out in early March, reinforced the declaration in the DSG 2012 that U.S. forces would no longer be sized to fight large-scale stability operations. Participants expressed strong opinions about this pronouncement; some decried it as "taking a critical tool out of the toolkit," and said that the United States would not be able to dictate which type of operations it gets involved in. Others pointed out that large-scale stability operations were not off the table, but simply would no longer be used to size the force.

Minimal Footprint: Conducting Persistent Engagement in an Access-Constrained Environment

One panelist explained that the DSG stresses that the United States will still counter irregular threats but will not do so using large-scale insurgency operations. Instead, it will focus on using “innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches.” The “small-footprint approach” is a lynchpin of the DSG. It has led to a number of initiatives within the military services, but it will require a whole range of USG initiatives, both military and non-military. The Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-South) and the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) are recognized cases of what can be accomplished with a small military footprint and close cooperation with other governmental agencies (along with the host countries and other local actors).

A number of panelists also spoke about how the change in the international environment will affect the future of U.S. engagement abroad. One speaker noted that the welcome mat would no longer be out in the way that it used to be for the United States. The U.S. may find previously friendly populations to be less welcoming in the future. Compounding this issue, several participants noted that there is a general perception of a decline in U.S. power, and this will affect the partnerships the United States is able to form and how it builds trusts with those partners.

Solutions and Tools

Symposium participants offered a wide variety of tools and solutions that the United States should implement and pursue in order to achieve successful persistent engagement.

Civilian agencies are key. Throughout the symposium, speakers and participants alike emphasized the need for increased interagency collaboration. Several speakers gave examples of successful partnerships, such as those between Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which illustrate the ways in which USG agencies’ strengths and weaknesses can be aligned to maximize the former and compensate for the latter. For example, SOCOM’s strength is security, while USAID’s strength is local dynamics. Working together, SOCOM can provide the security that USAID needs to operate in the field, while USAID can provide the knowledge of local dynamics needed to enable special operations at local levels. While noting numerous examples of successful whole-of-government solutions, many participants recognized that the United States has a mixed record in interagency work and that there is still much room for improvement in this area.

“You can’t surge trust.” Admiral William McRaven’s well-known assertion that “you can’t surge trust” was evoked several times throughout the symposium. Panelists spoke about the risk of decaying trust if the United States cannot keep its commitments to its partners: if trust is lost, it will take a long time to rebuild. Most panelists agreed that assuring our partners of our commitment to our alliances and partnerships will be even more critical moving forward. If the United States leaves a trust deficit, our partners are likely to turn elsewhere looking for strong

Across the globe we will seek to be the security partner of choice, pursuing new partnerships with a growing number of nations – including those in Africa and Latin America – whose interests and viewpoints are merging into a common vision of freedom, stability, and prosperity. *Whenever possible, we will develop innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to achieve our security objectives....*

— Defense Strategic Guidance, 2012

partnerships—perhaps even to U.S. adversaries. One panelist pointed out that key capabilities, such as interoperability with partner nations, would be impossible without trust.

Using local solutions to boost U.S. partners. Enhancing the capabilities and capacity of U.S. allies and partners is a critical part of persistent engagement. It can help demonstrate U.S. commitment without expending maximum resources and without getting heavily involved militarily. One panelist used the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership as an example of U.S. efforts to enhance partnership capacities. Another panelist emphasized that all solutions should be local, and that networks should be developed and maintained at the local level. A third speaker, highlighting a tension in policy making, explained that while local solutions are important, the United States must ensure that any local solutions pursued will be accepted at the national level; if they are not, they will not be sustainable.

Preventing crises before they begin. Participants highlighted the increased need for preventative measures in the evolving global security environment. If the United States is to avoid large-scale stability operations, it must undertake activities that prevent situations from descending into violent conflict. A panelist suggested that support of global non-violent movements for change can be one such effective measure. For example, the panelist said, if the United States or its allies had increased their support of the non-violent movement in Syria before the situation deteriorated into violent chaos, they might have been able to prevent or ameliorate the situation without getting involved militarily.

Enhancing U.S. knowledge of critical regions. Similarly, as the United States seeks to prevent violent conflict, it must have a good knowledge of regional dynamics, culture, and internal politics. If it is to foresee violent conflict in critical regions of the world, it must remain attuned to local dynamics. Furthermore, if the United States wishes to be able to prevent low-level conflict from intensifying, it must have a deep understanding of the region's culture, language, politics, and society. One panelist explained that the Army's formation of the first regionally aligned brigade illustrates the recognition of this need.

Updating the rule book. Several speakers noted that U.S. agency policies and procedures have not necessarily been designed to facilitate this new type of engagement. Many government agencies are working under legislation that was written decades ago, and no longer supports the national security mission of the United States. Because appropriate policies are lacking, it is often easier to spend money on a partner's problem than to use other solutions that are less expensive yet more politically difficult. Information sharing is one example of a solution that is less expensive yet much more difficult. Information is one resource that the United States has that is very valuable to partner nations, yet is very difficult to give to them. U.S. policies, procedures, and authorities should be updated to reflect the change in environment.

Evaluating progress towards the goal. With the decline in financial resources, it is crucial that the United States internalize lessons learned and prevent its agencies from repeating their mistakes. Similarly, it must make transparent assessments of progress toward specific goals in order to keep from wasting money or resources. As financial resources and political will dwindle, it should carefully evaluate the results of its efforts before continuing to expend valuable resources.

Conclusion

Implicit throughout the entire discussion was that the innovation and solutions required to make the DSG successful will be difficult and take time to implement. While the government tends to plan in five-year periods, one panelist suggested that the planning increase to 20-year periods, in order to accommodate for the length of time that many of these initiatives will take to implement.

One panelist suggested that it is critical for the United States to maintain humility as it fundamentally changes the way it conducts engagement. It must remain realistic about what it can accomplish with its engagement efforts, and think critically about the resources it devotes to these efforts. Further, it must recognize that its national security does not exist in a vacuum, but rather is a product of, and catalyst for, change in the global security environment. Therefore, as the international landscape changes, U.S. national security will have to remain flexible and dynamic to meet new challenges and leverage opportunities.

Finally, a critical question is whether the United States can overcome the resource gap by “working smarter.” Participants generally agreed that if the country is to cope with the diminishing budget and declining political acceptance of a large footprint, it will need to innovate and to think critically about how, when, and why it engages abroad in problems of international security.

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